

Seven Oaks Plantation  
(Petit Desert)  
Westwego  
Jefferson Parish  
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1158

HABS  
LA,  
26- WESWE,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SEVEN OAKS PLANTATION  
(Petit Desert)

HABS No. LA-1158

HABS  
LA,  
26-WESWE,  
1-

At Westwego across the river from uptown New Orleans stands one of the most impressive of Louisiana's great Greek Revival plantation mansions. Only Oak Alley in St. James Parish exceeds it in architectural merit among the surviving plantation houses which are completely surrounded by a colonnade running through two stories and with an upper gallery. But whereas Oak Alley stands beautifully restored behind its magnificent avenue of oaks in a lovely park-like setting, Seven Oaks, neglected by its railroad owners, is rapidly crumbling to ruin surrounded by huge black oil tanks and the remnants of its once beautiful oaks.

This was once the proud residence of a wealthy sugar planter, Camille Zeringue, undoubtedly a descendant of one of New Orleans' first settlers, Michel Seringue the contractor who built the first church of St. Louis and the first convent of the Ursulines, the former began in 1724 and the latter in 1727. The history of the plantation goes back even farther into French colonial history than does the family of the crumbling mansion. Originally it was one of the concessions granted on November 18, 1719 by John Law's Company of the Indies to Monseigneur Le Blanc, French Minister of State and his associates, the Marquis d'Asfeld, Marshal of France and Director General of Fortifications; the Comte de Belle Isle, Lieutenant-General of the King's Armies; and Gerard Michel de la Jonchere, Treasurer General of the Military Order of St. Louis. These distinguished personages raised among themselves a sum of 100,000 livres for the establishment which included three land grants, one below New Orleans on the west bank known as the Chouachae, "Seven Oaks" then known as the "Little Desert" and a third grant at Natchez. The Little Desert was to be the depot for goods

and slaves going to and from the other Le Blanc concessions and was therefore one of the first to be developed.

The Le Blanc associate's first settlers for their three concessions or plantations sailed from the port of L'Orient, France on June 30, 1720, with their own troops in charge of the half-pay captain, Ignace Francois Broutin. He had no doubt been selected for the position by the Marquis d'Asfeld, as his military service had been with the engineer corps. Broutin later became the Engineer-in-chief of Louisiana and was the architect of the Ursuline Convent on Chartres street and most of the official buildings of the French colony. In a letter to Governor Vaudreuil in 1751 it was stated that Broutin "was then (1720-21) employed in the said concessions (and) improved and cleared the one called the Little Desert, which is the first establishment made in this colony by the said Marshals de Belle Isle and d'Asfeld".

In 1738 the "Little Dessert" was sold by its original owners to the Sieure Assailly and Daunoy at which time it was described as "fourteen arpents of land frontage by the ordinary depth, situated at the place called the 'Little Desert', about one league above New Orleans on the other side of the river, with the huts, appurtenances and dependencies thereon".

From the 1754 inventory of Marie Payen, deceased wife of Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil it would appear that Dubreuil the contractor for the King's buildings and works in Louisiana had purchased the plantation from Assailly and D'aunoy prior to 1754. Part of it was then called "Barataria" and was described as "containing sixteen arpente of frontage by the ordinary depth of forty arpents situated on the other side of the Mississippi River at about a league from this town adjoining and above the Canal". This canal had been begun by

Villars Dubreuil in 1736 to connect Bayou Barataria through Lake Ouachas (Salvador) with the Mississippi. In 1740 he wrote that "this canal has already been of a great utility of the service of the King, having served for the passage of 20 boats constructed on the high lands of Barataria, intended for transporting troops of the Navy to the war against the Chickasaws".

According to the records of Dubreuil's succession in 1757 it would seem that prior to his death he had given this plantation to his son. For that reason only the one arpent of land containing the canal was included in the inventory of the succession. About 1772 the plantation was sold at auction to Pedro Delille Dupart. This sale was probably more of a legal transaction than a transfer of possession, for in March 1775 Dupart sold it to a son-in-law of Villars Dubreuil, Jean Louis Trudeau, the act of sale stating that "I, Don Pedro Delille called Dupare . . . sell really and in fact to Don Louis Trudeau who was Alcalde of this city, a plantation named Little Desert with about twenty arpents of front on the river, and a depth of forty or more, some two leagues distant from this city, situated on the other side of the river, bordered on one side by the land named , and on the other by that of Louis Harang . . . that belongs to me by having bought it at the auction, sale of the goods of Don Claudio Joseph Villare . . .". The sixteen arpents of Dubreuil's property called "Barataria" containing the canal was sold in March 1772 to Francisco Bouigny. The Spanish Judicial Records of 1773 contain lengthy litigation regarding rights to the canal involved in these sales.

Trudeau, who was probably the father or brother of the noted Spanish Surveyor Don Carlos Laveau Trudeau, owned the Little Desert until 1785 when he sold twelve arpents of it to Alexandre Harang.

Harang in 1794 sold part of the land to his son-in-law Michel Zeringue "with all the buildings which are constructed on it, their implements, utensils, groves and fences . . . with the expresseed condition that Mousieur Lebreton shall enjoy the canal which passes by said land while he is a neighbor".

Michel Zeringue died in 1816 and the plantation was inherited by his widow Josephine (called Josette) Harang. It now contained thirty four arpents, the title being confirmed by the American Government in 1812. There were various transfers of parts of the property among members of the Zeringue family and in April 1830 Camille Zeringue sold an arpent of land fronting the river to the Barataria Canal Company, and a half arpent along each side of Bayou Sainet (Segnette) "with right to cut trees as necessary to construct the locks of the canal which it proposes to cut through the land . . . as well as his rights on the canal which exists". This canal still exists, known as the Company Canal at Westwego.

Camille Zeringue who had been managing the plantation of his mother and sisters since 1813, eventually came into full possession and his extensive holdings, extending from the Company Canal almost to Nine Mile Point are shown on Zimple's map of New Orleans of 1834. A house is shown in the approximate location of the present one, and was probably the old house of his sister Marie Anne Azelie Zeringue widow in first marriage of Jean Baptiste Dorsino De Blanc, in second marriage of Joseph Lombard. In an inventory of 1823 it was described as "a master house about sixty feet square having eight rooms including two offices, bricked between posts with front and rear gallery, roofed with shingles".

The present house must have been built by Camille Zeringue about 1840, judging from its architectural character. Perhaps the name 'Seven Oaks' was given to it at that time. Its plan is almost identical with that of the Saulet house (Mercy Hospital) on Annunciation street, completed in 1834. Oak Alley which is more like "Seven Oaks" in its exterior, was built between 1837 and 1839 by George Swainey but it is unlikely that both these houses were the work of the same builder. Perhaps it was the work of the builder of the George A. Waggaman plantation at Avondale which was built in 1839 by Francis D. Gott from plans and under the superintendence of William Brand. No records of the actual date of building or the name of the builder of 'Seven Oaks' have yet been found.

The house is an excellent example of the style of the Greek Revival as adapted to the Louisiana plantation house. The house is large and almost square in plan, the front and rear colonnade containing each eight columns, with seven columns for each of the ends, a total of twenty six massive brick columns of the Doric order. The heavy wood cornice follows classic proportions and supports a huge pyramidal slate roof. Atop the roof is a rather clumsy belvedere from which a magnificent view of the city and the river may be obtained. It is said that originally there was an open deck with a balustrade, a sort of widow's walk as at Oak Alley, but this was replaced by the present belvedere during the time of the War between the States. Certainly with such a balustrade the house would have had a much more graceful appearance. Two dormers on each side of the roof give light to the immense unfinished attic.

The principal entrance originally faced the river. The doorway opening into a large entrance hall, is in the center of the facade,

and a similar door at the opposite end of the hall opens to the dining room. This is the largest room in the house and was once the finest, occupying the major part in the center of the rear of the house, with a small room at each end. Another large doorway similar to the entrance opens from the dining room to the rear and is flanked by two smaller French casement doors. At each end of the room is a fireplace, each of which once had black marble mantles of the period, but these are said to have been ripped out when the house was occupied by troops during World War I. Over the dining room table hung the usual punkah, the early version of a ceiling fan. The plaster cornice in this room has disappeared, although the original cornices are still to be found in most of the other rooms.

At the front of the house flanking the entrance hall are two large square rooms each with a fireplace, and behind each of these rooms is a stairway. The one to the right leads up from the entrance hall and continues to the attic. The other, on the lower side, is a sort of service stair and leads directly up from outside. This stair arrangement is like that originally found in the Saulst house, but the location of the dining room on the central axis results in a more impressive plan form.

On the second floor the hallway extends from front to back with the four bedrooms each occupying a corner of the house. The difference in plan of the two floors of the house requires an odd manipulation of the chimneys as the fireplaces at each end of the dining room are actually under the centers of the two rear bedrooms. This necessitates the flues being carried across in the wall below the second floor level, a most unusual arrangement. The four huge brick chimneys then extend up and project symmetrically through the roof.

Camille Zeringue continued to reside on his plantation and to cultivate his extensive sugar fields until his death. Then in 1891 it was acquired by Sheriff's deed by the Citizens Bank which sold it the following year to Pablo Sala. In 1898 it was bought from him by A. A. Lelong. Charles T. Soniat acquired it in 1906 and sold in 1912 to the Missouri Pacific Railroad, its present owner.

It is tragic that this fine house, so close to the city and so easily accessible to tourists, is being allowed to fall into decay. Being located only a mile from the west end of the Huey Long Bridge it would become an unequalled tourist attraction if properly restored. The Louisiana Landmarks Society has tried to promote and encourage such a project for several years, but so far without success. Unless something is done very soon it will be too late to save another of Louisiana's great plantation houses, one which might even be able to support itself on tourists' dollars if given a chance.

Samuel Wilson, Jr.  
November 14, 1953



## Chain of Title

COB 31 f.344	1912 Apr.24	(M. C. Soniat) - acquired by E. G. Merriam as Trustee for M.P.RR Co. from Charles T. Soniat. (Jeff.)
COB 25 f.348	1906 Mar.20	(M.C. Soniat) - acquired by Soniat from A.A. Lelong Land and Improvement Ass'n., Ltd. (Jeff.)
COB 21 f.683	1902 Sep.10	(Edgar Grima) - A.A.Lelong Land and Improvement Ass'n., Ltd. acquired from Alphonse A. Lelong. (Jeff.)
COB 21 f.177	1901 Sep.21	(Edgar Grima) - A.A.Lelong acquired from Narcisso Barres Durell (Jeff.)
COB 'W' 1898 f.687	Feb.11	Civil Dist. Court Orleans Parish Docket 55005 - Durall acquired from Maria Sala y Fabregas by inheritance. (Jeff.)
COB 'Z' 1895 f.80	Apr.16	Docket 44,121 - Sala acquired from Pablo Sala by inheritance. (Jeff.)
COB 'N' 1892 f.195	Mar.7	(Edgar Grima) - P. Sala acquired from Citizens Bank of La. (Jeff.)
COB 'T' 1891 f.782 (Jeff.)	Nov.16	Sheriff's deed - Bank acquired from widow and heirs of Camille Zeringue - 34 arpents acquired by C. Zeringue as follows: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.- 3 Arpents from succession of F.Zeringue bef. J.M. Harang, Judge of Probate Court P. of Jan. 13, 1830.</li> <li>2.- 3 Arpents from succession of F.Zeringue bef. J.M. Harang, May 31, 1826.</li> <li>3.- 12 Arpents from his late mother Widow Michel Zeringue bef. C.V. Foulon N.P. (Orleans) 4 Apr. 1848 (Vol. 21 #41).</li> <li>4.- 8 Arpents donation from Mother bef. N. Broutin 28 Nov. 1815.</li> <li>5.- 8 Arpents from succession of Fortune Zeringue: <math>\frac{1}{2}</math> bef. J.M. Harang, 31 May 1826 &amp; <math>\frac{1}{2}</math> from sister, Mrs. J.B.D. DeBlanc, bef. Hugh Lavergne, 5 Mar. 1825.</li> </ol> <p>Title to 34 Arpente confirmed to Michel Zeringue, father of Camille Zeringue, 1 Jan. 1812; Am. State Papers Vol. 2, f. 323.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6.- Section or lot 29 T.135 - R.23 E. acquired by C. Zeringue from U.S. Government 28 Mar. 1822, Certificate B.P. No. 26.</li> <li>7.- Section or lot 35 T.135 - R.23 E. acquired by C. Zeringue from State of Louisiana 7 Dec. 1854, Certificate Nos. 1045 &amp; 1046, NS</li> </ol>
	1848 Apr.4	(C.V. Foulon) Mrs. Azelie Zeringue, widow of Joseph Lombard sells half portion of 34 arpents plantation to Camille Zeringue.
Vol. 27 # 411	1830 Apr.21	(F. de Armae) Sale of land and Canal by Camille Zeringue to the Corporation of Barataria Canal.
	1825 Mar.5	(H. Lavergne #2842) Marie Anne Azelie Zeringue, wife of Guillaume Joseph Lombard, Jr. sold to her brothers Camille and Fortune Zeringue one undivided half each, a plantation situated on the right bank of the river, at a distance of about 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ leagues above New Orleans, having 8 arpents frontage by 100 in depth, bounded on one side by the property of Louis Cesar Le Breton Deschappelles, and on the other by that of the said Camille Zeringue, including all buildings and appurtenances, acquired by Mrs. Lombard as a donation from the late Michel Zeringue and Mrs. Josephine, alias

Josette Harang, her father and mother by act before Narcisse Broutin, July 13, 1813.

- 1813 July 13 (N.Broutin) Michel Zeringue acquires 24 arpents from Jean Baptiste Dorsinos Deblanc.
- 1812 May 18 (N.Broutin) Sale of a plantation by the Zeringue heirs to Alexandre Harang.
- 1812 U. S. confirms Zeringue in possession of 34 Arpente.
- Vol.62 f. 98 1811 Mar.10 (P.Pedesclaux) Willand testament of Michel Zeringue resident on his plantation on the Tschoupitoulas Coast, native of Opelousas, son of Jean Louis Zeringue and Francoise Lacroix, both living, married to Marie Joseph Harang, father of Camille aged 19, Azelie 14 and Fortune 9, - brother of Jean Louis Zeringue - leaves plantation and slaves to wife and children.
- 1794 Jan.31 (P.Pedesclaux) Alexandre Harang sells 10 arpente to his son-in-law, Michel Zeringue. Neighbor Le Breton to enjoy the canal which paseee by said land.
- 1785 Nov.21 (F. Rodriguez) Jean Luis Trudeau eells 12 arpents to Alexandre Harang.
- 1775 Mar.27 (J.B.Garic) Pedro Delille Dupart sells Little Deeert Plantation (20 arpents) to Jean Luis Trudeau.
- Pedro Debille Dupart acquiree Little Desert at auction sale of the goods of Don Claudio Joseph Villars.
- 1773 Nov.25 Felicite Dubreuil Amelot aske that final 100 pesos due on the arpent of land of the canal be paid to Dubreuil Brothers by Esteban Bore from residue of estate funde. So ordered by Unzaga.
- 1773 July 6 Joseph Villars, Captain of the Royal Artillery Corps asks payment of his share.
- 1773 June 14 Francieco Bouligny declares that at public auction he bought the plantation called Barataria, adjudicated March 16, 1772 "on the other side of the river at about a league from the city, 16 arpents front by 40 deep with a sawmill, 3 houses encloeed with stakes etc., adjoined on the lower side by Mrs. Delisle's and on the upper by Mr. Carlier. On it there is a large canal which begins at about 2 arpents from the river and proceeds until it meets, at the rear of the land, abbayou by which it communicates with Barataria Lake. This canal runs a distance of two and a half arpente, the length of Mrs. Delisle's boundary and nearly parallel with it as far as the said bayou. Besides this large canal made formerly by the deceased Dubreuil there is another which serves for the mill and flows into the large canal. Dubreuil sold this plantation of 15 arpents to his son leaving one arpent including the canal for the benefit of all his heirs. (road, bridge & maintenance of canal specified.)
- The auction sale is then made of a plantation called the Little Wilderness (Pequeno Deserto) (Petit Desert) and is adjudicated to Francisco Bouligny for 2080 hard pesos - Bouligny finally agrees to pay 200 pesos and free passage of the canal for all time, but they cannot build on this arpent & must demolish any buildings thereon.

- 1773 June 2 Jacobo Dubreuil, Lt. of the Battalion of La., Raymundo Dubreuil, 2nd Flag Lt. of the same Battalion and for Luis Villars Dubreuil, Lt. now stationed in Illinois and Don Alexandre Dubreuil, retired officer... have entered suit for 1 arpent of land containing a Canal which was included in the sale of a plantation made by said Villars to Francisco Bouligny. They also presented two instruments which make it clear that the arpents and Canal belong to them.
- LHQ 9 1773 May 29 Certified Copy of Inventory of estate of Mr. & Mrs. Dubreuil dated p.546 October 14, 1754.
- 1773 May 28 Joseph Villars, Captain in the Royal Artillery Corps, representing his two sisters, complains that in the seizure of their father's property they included the dowry of their mother, Catalina Laboulaye; asks 2000 pesos.
- LHQ 9 1773 May 10 Sentence in case of Creditors vs. Claudio Joseph Villars to be passed May 26, 1773 - 2000 pesos paid to Mrs. Fleuriau and 2000 to Mrs. Trudeau, heirs of their grandfather, Claudio Villars; to Marie Louise Dauberville Bouligny 6494 pesos  $\frac{1}{2}$  real - to Esteban Bore 15000 pesos & other claims. —
- LHQ 8 1771 Sep.30 Inventory to be made of the plantation of Claudio Joseph Villars p.711 Dubreuil one league above the city on the other side of the river. Juana Catalina Dubreuil, wife of Carlos Fleuriau and Juana Felicidad Dubreuil, wife of Juan Trudeau, daughters of C.J.V. Dubreuil. —
- LHQ 8 1770 In 1770 Francisco de Bouligny married Marie Louise Dauberville, p.729 daughter of Vincent Guillaume Le Senechal Dauberville, Commissioner of the Marine and Ordonnateur and Francoise Petit de Levillier de Coulange. Married in Feb. 1747, Dauberville died in 1757.
- LHQ 8 1768 Oct.5 Unzaga orders Villars committed to prison and his property seized. (Suit begun 4 Mar. by Francisca Petit de Coulange widow of Col. Pedro de Villemont and Capt. Francisco Bouligny for his wife Maria Luisa Dorverville (Dauberville), which suit resulted in this seizure.) Villars' confession - he is aged 56 years, a resident of this province and a widower. He said the doors of his house were closed (against the officers) by one of his daughters... This was not in his lodgings because he lives farther up.
- LHQ 8 1768 Feb.1 Joseph Maison, sheriff ordered to seize property of Villars in execution of judgements of the Council in favor of Mr. Gerardo de Villemont (t) for what was due Mr. Dauberville's heirs. Seizure resulted.
- (LSM) 1759 Jan.4 Claude Joseph Villars Dubreuil from Catherine Hubert Bellair, widow of Charles Favre Dannoy.
- 1752 Mar.6 Dannoy acquires Assailly's interest by act at Cap Francois.
- 1738 Jan.28 LeBlanc Concessions sold to Assailly and Dannoy including Little Desert.
- 1719 Nov.18 Concessions granted by the Company of the Indies to LeBlanc, D'Asfeld and Associates including Little Desert.